# British Journal for Military History

Volume 7, Issue 1, March 2021


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**ISSN:** 2057-0422

**Date of Publication:** 19 March 2021

**Citation:** Helena Power, 'Repetition versus Revision: Narratives in the BBC's Great War Centenary', *British Journal for Military History*, 7.1 (2021), pp. 135-152.

www.bjmh.org.uk





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# Repetition *versus* Revision: Narratives in the BBC's Great War Centenary

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Abstract
*The BBC's[1] plans for the First World War Centenary were of significant magnitude. Through 2,500 hours of programming, it sought to broaden knowledge of the conflict across its various media. Yet this objective was occasionally diminished by the resounding presence of popularised tropes about the war. With consideration of two key anniversaries and flagship programmes, this article reflects upon the balance between familiar ideas and new developments, the disconnect between television programming and developing historiography and the use of modern techniques in conveying a new narrative.*

## Introduction

'History repeats itself' is a commonly expressed idiom. Less publicly considered is the extent to which we repeat history, and the impact this repetition has on our understanding of history itself. Public understanding and representation of history - more succinctly interpreted as a 'cultural memory' of the past — has received increased academic attention in recent decades. For the Great War, cultural memory has been expressed through various means, including remembrance rituals, memorials, and television programmes. The 2014-2018 centenary was a key anniversary in the cultural memory of the conflict. Anniversaries are the milestones of memory. Aside from their status as fixed moments for remembrance, their purpose as milestones works in two ways: the public experience anniversaries as markers of the increasing temporal distance of an event, and academics use them to explore how cultural memory has (or has not) evolved over time. Paradoxically, anniversaries also transform historical events into current events, with media playing a key role in this by emphasising the importance of remembrance.[2] Outside of these major milestones,

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v7i1.1471
[1]The British Broadcasting Corporation – hereinafter BBC.
[2]Tobias Ebbrecht, 'History, Public Memory and Media Event: Codes and Conventions of Historical Event-Television in Germany', *Media History*, 13, 2 (2007), p. 223; T.G.

Remembrance Day has been the backbone of remembrance, and a focal point for the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) commemorative practices for over 90 years. Yet cultural memory is not fixed; it has been remoulded over time to suit the mood and atmosphere at the time. The BBC's plans for the centenary were a blend of familiarity and convergence with the reshaping of the commemorative landscape in the 21 Century. Particular consideration of two key anniversaries within the centenary — the Somme and the Armistice — highlights that while the BBC intended to improve public knowledge of the Great War, the overall narrative struggled to reach beyond the tones of the 1960s, in particular with references to futility, statistics and the use of familiar imagery. Repetition is a fundamental feature of television, as the reuse of images and terminology creates a recognisable continuity for the viewer. This article explores the evident clash between the BBC's longstanding grand narrative of a futile war, and the implementation of programming reflective of its objective to improve public knowledge about the conflict. The media sources will primarily focus on programmes broadcast for the Somme and the Armistice, as these were focal points in commemoration for both the BBC and the government. While a range of commemorative programmes were broadcast on other channels (and are worthy of further research), the BBC remains the focus here, to specifically locate the centenary within the corporation's commemorative history of the war. Through a comparative consideration of media and historiography, it offers a contribution to the three burgeoning fields of military history, media history and memory studies.

## Commemoration and the BBC

The centenary was undoubtedly the last major commemoration of the Great War, and as such represented a crucial opportunity to increase public knowledge about the conflict.[3] One of the earliest concerns raised, however, was that the front-loading of events in the government's plans would result in 'centenary fatigue' within the first year.[4] As the BBC's commemorations were partially structured around government events (mostly in relation to broadcasting them), there were similar balancing issues, although the corporation signalled an awareness of this by allocating 'a planned pause

Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper, 'The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration: Contexts, Structures and Dynamics', in T.G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper (eds.) *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration,* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 4.

[3]A view expressed by numerous historians. See Stephen Badsey, 'A Muddy Vision of the Great War', *History Today*, 65, 5 (2015), p. 46; Gary Sheffield, 'A Once in a Century Opportunity? Some Personal Reflections on the Centenary of the First World War', *British Journal for Military History*, 1, 1 (2014), p. 2.

[4]Ibid., p. 9; Keith Jeffery, 'Commemoration in the United Kingdom: A Multitude of Memories', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 50, 3 (2015), p. 566.

in the coverage in 2015'.[5] This arguably had the regrettable consequence of distorting public comprehension of wartime chronology, as it implied that nothing of note occurred in 1915. As a publicly funded institution, it is unsurprising that much of the BBC's output was centred around the government's commemorative events. Had the BBC considered the centenary independently, the fluctuations in programming intensity may have been less pronounced. If we assume that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) set the 'rhythm' for the centenary, then the BBC amplified it. This imbalance was not consistent across the BBC's platforms though, as commemorative programming on radio remained reasonably steady across all four years (See Figure A). This may be symptomatic of the differences between the audiences - someone can listen to the radio while carrying on with other tasks, whereas the visual stimulus of television requires focus to properly digest the material. It was therefore possible for the BBC to commence its centenary season on Radio 3 with a remarkable 65 hours of material in January 2015 alone; to put this in context, the combined total of centenary programming across all BBC television channels in 2014 was 76 hours.

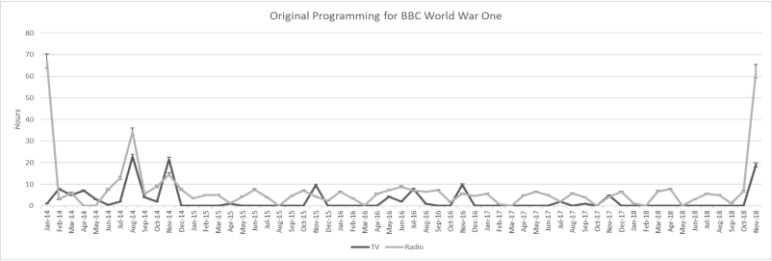


**Figure A: Hours of Original Broadcasting[6]**

Broadcasting hours dwindled over the next few years, and the complete schedule was reminiscent of a runner who started a marathon with an overzealous sprint, then ran out of energy for most of the race before finding a second wind towards the end. The intensity of the start of the centenary in comparison to what followed was reflected in the number of people who recalled having recently seen something about the centenary on television. This figure dropped from 48% in 2014 to 38% in 2018.[7] There was, however, a benefit to the explosion of activity on the BBC in 2014; the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) indicated that the 'flood of Centenary broadcasting' in 2014 was a probable factor in the 'surge in public interest' in the same year, and thus was also

[5]Jane Ellison, 'World War One on the BBC', *Cultural Trends*, 27, 2 (2018), p. 129.
[6]Excludes repeats and re-runs under the BBC's First World Schedule.
[7]Lucy Buckerfield and Steve Ballinger, *The People's Centenary: Tracking Public Attitudes to the First World War Centenary 2013–2018* (London: British Future, 2019), p. 29.

partly responsible for the unprecedented number of requests the HLF received for funding.[8] The role of the BBC within the promotion of anniversaries, and the impact of this further afield, is therefore clear.

Public adherence to remembrance rituals is manifested in the consistent commemoration of the Armistice. The BBC has had a longstanding relationship with this event, beginning with the first radio broadcast of the service at the Cenotaph in 1928. This was a noteworthy decision for a medium with aural output, yet 'the crucial element in broadcasting the Silence was that it was not silence that was being broadcast, but rather the absence of deliberate noise'.[9] By broadcasting the event into people's homes, the BBC expanded the sombre atmosphere of the Silence across the nation. In this manner, whether in public or in private, 'silence remains an essential part of our landscape of memory'.[10] Armistice Day has remained a key component in the BBC's annual schedule. Throughout the centenary, broadcasts of *The Royal British Legion Festival of Remembrance* on BBC1 consistently achieved an audience of over five million viewers, peaking in 2018 at over seven million.[11] Thus the BBC broadened the 'landscape of memory' into peoples' homes, and maintained the recognition of key anniversaries of the war.

Television served another role in the centenary by generating 'our obsession with commemoration and anniversaries, through its repetition and continual re-narrativisation of grand historical narratives'.[12] The BBC has consistently promoted anniversaries to the public, originating with the development of a working relationship with the Imperial War Museum (IWM) in 1923, wherein it regularly dispatched a list of anniversaries it intended to mention and enquired if the museum held any relevant exhibits.[13] The repetition aspect is significant regarding the use of familiar images and

[8]Karen Brookfield, 'The People's Centenary: A Perspective from the Heritage Lottery Fund', *Cultural Trends*, 27, 2 (2018), p. 120.
[9]Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919–1946,* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), p. 135.
[10]Jay Winter, *War Beyond Words: Languages of Remembrance from the Great War to the Present*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 202.
[11]'Weekly Top 30', Broadcasters' Audience Research Board, http://www.barb.co.uk/viewing-data/four-screen-dashboard/. Accessed 17 June 2020. This peak is somewhat diminished by the fact that the figures indicate over 4 million people changed channel once *Strictly Come Dancing* had finished.
[12]Amy Holdsworth, *Television, Memory and Nostalgia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 1.
[13]Imperial War Museum, London, EN1/1/BRO/001, 'Correspondence regarding suggestions for programmes or features, including anniversaries of significant dates, and a talk by Sir Martin Conway about the IWM, broadcast on 12 November 1924'.

footage which serve as 'stereotyped symbols of past events'.[14] They form the foundation for a visual understanding of the war by providing a 'lexicon of images' from which an understanding of conflict and remembrance is formed.[15] This visual cache of wartime imagery has been built up across decades of BBC broadcasting, originating with the opening montage of images for *The Great War* (1964), with which the public formed a strong connection.[16] These images, such as footage of the explosion of a mine on Hawthorn Ridge, were recycled during the BBC's centenary to present a familiar imagery of war to the public. The perpetuation of audio-visual material is a key element in the endurance of cultural memory.[17]

**Television and Other Technologies**

Owing to its extant large audience, television was a well-placed medium to undertake the commemorative and educational objectives of the centenary. To improve knowledge of the conflict, producers needed to amend the narrative of Great War programming to reflect more recent historiography, in order to move on from the popular narratives of previous decades (particularly the 'futility' narrative of the 1960s).[18] As recently as the 1990s, television was failing to keep pace with historiographical developments, partially due to an unwillingness from documentary editors to present content which might be deemed controversial.[19] It is possible, of course, that the rationale behind this narrative stagnation was purely pragmatic. Throughout previous decades, 'a complex network of narrative patterns, personal experiences, testimonies, [and] images' has been produced.[20] The development of these patterns is likely connected to audience reception; where a particular narrative

[14]Ebbrecht, 'History, Public Memory and Media Event', p. 222.

[15]Maggie Andrews, 'Poppies, Tommies and Remembrance', *Soundings*, 58 (2014), p. 106.

[16]Emma Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen: Representing the First World War in Contemporary Britain,* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 39; Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory,* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), pp. 29-35.

[17]Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, 'Setting the Framework', in Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (eds.), *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 31.

[18]A narrative commonly attributed to the critical views of the wartime generals espoused in Alan Clark's *The Donkeys*, (London: Hutchinson, 1961) that sees the First World War as futile, fought about nothing and solving nothing, and composed of nothing but mud, blood and incompetence.

[19]Badsey, 'A Muddy Vision', p. 47; Roger Smither, 'Why is so much Television History about War?', in David Cannadine (ed.), *History and the Media,* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 51. It should be noted that there have been exceptions to this, such as *The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century* (BBC, 1996).

[20]Ebbrecht, 'History, Public Memory and Media Event', p. 232.

proves popular, producers will be unwilling to risk their ratings by veering from the established format.[21] Nevertheless, keeping in step with established tropes would not change anything; if the BBC truly wished to take up the mantle of transforming popular knowledge, a new approach was required.

With the increasing range of technology available in the digital era, there were numerous possibilities for change. The BBC utilised a range of different mediums, a prime example being 'Nothing to be Written', an interactive 360° video of the trenches intended for viewing using a virtual reality (VR) headset.[22] The use of a relatively new technology was a promising indicator of the BBC's adoption of new platforms, and potentially an attempt to engage with younger generations. As VR technology continues to be developed (and if the BBC VR Hub remains active), it may be a more prominent feature of the centenary for the Second World War. There was a recognised need to combine the expertise available with the technological opportunities presented by television. Jane Ellison, former Head of Creative Partnerships at the BBC, claimed that the centenary was 'built on world class academic excellence, curatorial expertise and artistic integrity — a unique combination that with new technology [has shaped] another chapter in the history of Commemoration [*sic*]'.[23] This highlights the importance of technology in modern commemoration, and connects with Jay Winter's observations of the relationship between technological developments and the evolution of 'memory booms'.[24]

Television, in tandem with the Internet, demonstrated its role in producing a digital archive for the future which could preserve this period in the history of commemoration. The BBC also utilised the Internet as a source for supplementary information to television broadcasts. The 'World War One' website provides additional articles on topics covered during the centenary.[25] Yet the permanence of this archive is uncertain; while the main website was active at the time of writing, the 'Somme 100' website (which provided further information about the battle) has been replaced with a reduced version. The disappearance of websites has diminished the

[21]BBC History magazine editor Rob Attar reflected on the appeal of 'traditional stories' in Catriona Pennell, *Bringing the Marginal into the Mainstream: 'Hidden Histories', Public Engagement and Lessons Learned from the Centenary of the First World War*, http://teachlearnwar.exeter.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2018-HUMS-041-Hidden-Histories-Report-FINAL.pdf. Accessed 8 September 2020,

[22]'Nothing to be Written', BBC, http://canvas-story.bbcrewind.co.uk/sites/virtual-reality-prom. Accessed 18 June 2019,

[23]Ellison, 'World War One on the BBC', p. 129.

[24]Winter, *War Beyond Words*, pp. 203–205.

[25]'World War One', *BBC*, http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01nb93y. Accessed 18 June 2019.

expected digital legacy of the centenary. Having rendered the Great War as 'the most digitally documented period in history, [...] it is not clear that this material will be discoverable or useable in 5, let alone 50 or 100, years' time'.[26] Even when websites are collected by the British Library Web Archive, access for many websites is only possible on their premises, so the availability of such sources will be no different to the traditional archives primarily inhabited by professional historians and research enthusiasts.

The heyday that television has enjoyed since the fiftieth anniversary of the war is becoming increasingly tenuous, as alternative technologies encroach on its cultural dominance. Alongside the competition faced by the BBC on television, online streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime have been rapidly increasing their audience share. While television viewing has remained the primary method for watching programmes, the gap between live television and on-demand viewing is narrowing.[27] Furthermore, subscription numbers for streaming services have been rapidly outstripping prominent cable companies.[28] While the BBC maintained its prominence in centenary awareness, a different scenario for the centenary of the Second World War is possible. Whereas Netflix has, at the time of writing, less than ten programmes and series related to the First World War, they have over 40 related to the Second World War.[29] It is therefore possible that the centenary for the Second World War may find its foundations in less traditional media outlets.

**Popular Tropes**

Narrative was an important factor in the BBC's attempt to improve public knowledge during the centenary, yet it was hampered by a lack of chronological consistency. By providing extensive coverage around the outbreak of the war and then broadcasting little until the anniversary of the Somme in 2016, the BBC re-emphasised the prominence of the battle in public understanding of the war. The Somme has long served as a keystone in the futility narrative of the war; a failure to develop on this

[26]Brookfield, 'The People's Centenary', p. 122.

[27]'Catch-up and Live TV Compared', Broadcasters' Audience Research Board, http://www.barb.co.uk/viewing-data/catch-up-and-live-tv-compared. Accessed 18 June 2019,

[28]'Netflix to Overtake Sky's Satellite TV Subscriptions by End of Year', *The Guardian*, 23 December 2018, http://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/dec/23/netflix-to-overtake-sky-satelite-tv-subscriptions-by-end-of-year.

[29]For the First World War, see, http://www.netflix.com/search?q=World%20War%20I&suggestionId=108261_collection. Accessed 19 June 2019; For the Second World War, see http://www.netflix.com/search?q=World%20War%20I&suggestionId=108262_collection. Accessed 19 June 2019.

epitomising approach would not improve public understanding. It is therefore pertinent to consider whether tropes associated with the futility narrative, such as 'lions led by donkeys', endured during the BBC's centenary programming. Other narrative aspects will also be considered: the recycling of previously popular narratives borrowed from *The Great War*; the reliance on statistics to inform and drive the narrative; the involvement of historians in lending expertise to the BBC's coverage; and finally two case studies which demonstrated the presentation of a 'new' narrative in a familiar format, and the presentation of a familiar narrative in a 'new' format.

*'Lions Led by Donkeys'?*

This phrase has served as a sound-bite criticism of the failure of Great War generals to adequately lead and protect their brave soldiers. Initially popularised by Alan Clark's eponymous work *The Donkeys* (1961), it became the title for a programme on Channel 4 in 1985, which was the first programme to be openly critical of British High Command.[30] The idiom shares a strong association with the Somme, for which the death toll of the first day has often been conveyed as a catastrophic failure by British generals. When discussing the battle before the ceremony at Thiepval, Dan Snow stated of the men that 'their generals had sent them in with the wrong tactics'.[31] He did not offer any input on why the objectives were initially unsuccessful, or indeed on what the 'right' tactics might have been.

In countenance to this, some academics have argued that the battle was a single part of a long learning process.[32] This 'learning' motif was echoed in centenary broadcasts. During further BBC coverage of commemorations for the battle, David Olusoga described the Somme as 'an awful and tragic stepping stone in a long process of learning'.[33] When Margaret Macmillan appeared on the BBC's coverage of the Armistice ceremony, she argued that the 'donkeys' analogy was unfair as the generals were learning.[34] There is no consensus among historians about the learning process during the war - despite the prevalence of the 'learning curve' interpretation in historiographical discourse, it is not universally accepted.[35] Even alternatives to the learning curve, such as the 'staircase' posited by Gordon Corrigan,[36] do not allow for

[30]Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen*, p. 22.
[31]*The Centenary of the Battle of the Somme: Thiepval,* BBC1 London, 1 July 2016.
[32]See Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities,* (London: Sharpe, 2nd edn 2018).
[33]*Battle of the Somme: Thiepval.*
[34]*World War One Remembered: The Cenotaph,* BBC1 London, 11 November 2018.
[35]Heather Jones, 'As the Centenary Approaches: The Regeneration of First World War Historiography', *Historical Journal*, 56, 3 (2013), p. 862.
[36]Gordan Corrigan, *Mud, Blood and Poppycock: Britain and the First World War,* (London: Cassell, 2nd edn 2004), p. 284.

any setbacks in progress of warfare strategy. Perhaps, on balance, it could be argued that wartime strategic developments undulated as much as the terrain they fought on.

*Echoes of* The Great War

The BBC's landmark series from the fiftieth anniversary of the conflict, *The Great War* (1964), is rooted in the bedrock of the Corporation's institutional memory of the war. It was thus unsurprising that it also served as an inspiration for plans around centenary programming. Speaking at the launch event for the centenary, Director-General Tony Hall began by recalling the series as one of his 'vivid' childhood memories, which represented 'the BBC at its best'.[37] One of its defining features was that it gave a voice to low-ranking veterans, an aspect which was maintained through recycled footage and recordings of them during the centenary. This is also part of an ongoing trend in the personalisation of historical television, in which witnesses of historical events serve as 'protagonists' in related programming.[38] Indeed, the flurry of activity around them when it became clear there was little time left to collect their stories resulted in a 'moment of reinvigoration' of Great War memorialisation 'which preceded, perhaps perforce, the anniversary marked by 2014'.[39] The passing of the veterans meant no further recordings of them could be obtained. In this regard, it is their echoes, and those recorded for previous documentaries, which will endure in cultural memory through their repetition on the BBC. The reverent status of *The Great War* is particularly remarkable as the BBC must delve past more recent programming (for example, its 1996 programme, *The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century*) to reuse its content. This strongly indicates a preference for the older series, and for the reassertion of its narrative. The Corporation commenced the centenary with another major documentary, namely *Britain's Great War* (BBC, 2014). Presented by Jeremy Paxman, it utilised the familiar blend of archive footage and pieces to camera to consider the war both chronologically and thematically over four episodes. This is notably shorter than the 1996 and 1964 documentaries, though this might be due in part to its function as an accompaniment to Paxman's book of the same title. It was critically well-received, albeit with some criticism for Paxman's reference to conscientious objectors as 'cranks'.[40] Nevertheless, it demonstrates the key role of documentaries in commemoration on the BBC.

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[37]Tony Hall at the BBC World War One Comms Launch on 16 October 2013. The script for this event was kindly provided to the author by Robert Seatter at the BBC.
[38]Ebbrecht, 'History, Public Memory and Media Event', p. 225.
[39]Nick Webber and Paul Long, 'The Last Post: British Press Representations of Veterans of the Great War', *Media, War & Conflict*, 7, 3 (2014), p. 274.
[40]Occurs in 'The War Machine', *Britain's Great War*, BBC1 London, 3 February 2014. For further details on these criticisms, see 'Jeremy Paxman Brands Conscientious Objectors of WW1 'Cranks' – Twitter Reacts', *Huffington Post*, 4 February 2014,

*Commemorating by Numbers*

A regular feature throughout the centenary was the habitual deployment of statistics. Undoubtedly intended to provide short, clear facts about the conflict, their use was hampered by two issues: they were often incorrect or misleading, and they offered nothing towards a deepened understanding of the war. Their inaccurate use did not go unnoticed; Stephen Badsey noted that Stephen Knight, the writer for *Peaky Blinders*, claimed in an interview that 60,000 men died each day – if this had been the case, the total death toll for the war would have been over double the population of the UK.[41] The misleading use of statistics is particularly prevalent in relation to the Somme. Viewers would have struggled to watch any coverage of the Somme commemorations without encountering the ubiquitous figure of 60,000 in relation to first-day casualties.[42] The relationship between such statistics and futility narratives of the war is reflected by the fact the figure was often quoted near the start of the programme, reaffirming extant notions before any in-depth discussion took place. A further issue here is that casualty figures were often presented as fact, with no allusion to them as estimates, nor any indication of their inclusion or exclusion of civilians. This should be redressed, particularly as there have been recent efforts to demonstrate the difficult of relaying figures for the war.[43] If casualty figures were the main takeaway for the public from the BBC's centenary programming, then public understanding of the war was arguably not improved by the programmes. Statistics do not explain how battles unfolded, or how the war progressed, or even the lives lived by the men they impersonally refer to; they provide no representation of the complexity and nuance of wartime experiences.

## Historians and the BBC

At the BBC's centenary launch event, the then-World War One Centenary Controller Adrian Van Klaveren explicitly outlined the use of 'today's most eminent historians […] to take a fresh look at the war itself and how it shaped the world in which we

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http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/02/04/jeremy-paxman-britains-great-war-cranks_n_4721895.html, Accessed 28 November 2020.

[41]Badsey, 'A Muddy Vision', p. 47. The interview he indirectly refers to can be found in: 'Who Were the Real Peaky Blinders?', Radio Times, 7 June 2019, https://www.radiotimes.com/news/2019-06-07/who-were-the-peaky-blinders.

[42]Mentioned on *The Centenary of the Battle of the Somme: The Vigil,* BBC2 England, 30 June 2016; *The Centenary of the Battle of the Somme: Zero Hour,* BBC1 London, 1 July 2016; *Battle of the Somme: Thiepval*; 'Somme Centenary Service', *BBC News Special*, BBC News 24, 1 July 2016; 'The Battle of the Somme', *The People Remember*, BBC1 London, 8 November 2016.

[43]Antoine Prost, 'The Dead', in Jay Winter et al (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the First World War* vol. III, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 563-567.

now live'.[44] There were also initiatives for involving historians in the broader centenary. As part of the 'World War One at Home' project, which sought to describe the impact of the war in the UK and Ireland, the BBC partnered with the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the IWM, and selected a group of historians as researchers for each of the BBC Nations (i.e. BBC Scotland, BBC Wales and BBC Northern Ireland). The project has produced an archive of information available online (at present),[45] demonstrating the importance of historians in the educational legacy produced by the BBC during the centenary.

The BBC often featured historians during coverage of live events. Panels included historians from the BBC's usual cache alongside guest historians. Heather Jones appeared on one such panel during coverage of the commemoration of the Somme, which she described as 'a touchstone for all the carnage of the First World War'.[46] Her cultural knowledge of the war was usefully manifested in noting the experiences of surviving soldiers and their families, as well as understanding the contemporary cultural impetus behind enlistment. Sophie De Schaepdrijver participated in the panel for the Passchendaele commemorations. Despite presenter Kirsty Young's consistent appeals for her input 'as a Belgian', De Schaepdrijver noted the importance of an awareness of transnational suffering in commemoration and highlighted a public 'disconnect coupled with an intense desire to understand'.[47] There is further evidence of tensions between the BBC and professional historians. The BBC adopted 'World War One' for its centenary coverage, whereas some historians prefer terms such as 'the Great War' or 'First World War'. Thus, while recording a video for the BBC website, one historian undertook numerous takes due to their automatic use of the term 'First World War' in contrast to the BBC's preferred term.[48] The BBC thus appeared out of step with the experts it sought out.

The relationship between history and television is not a settled one either. This might partly be due to clashes between history as practice and history as television. As Stephen Badsey has noted, 'what makes good history may not make good TV'.[49] Producers face the unenviable task of simultaneously appeasing historians with rigorous analysis and entertaining the public enough to keep them tuned in. An ever-

[44]Adrian Van Klaveren, World War One Comms Launch, 16 October 2013.
[45]Available at 'World War One at Home', https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01nhwgx. Accessed 12 July 2019,
[46]*Battle of the Somme: Thiepval*.
[47]'For the Fallen', *World War One Remembered: Passchendaele*, BBC2 England, 30 July 2017.
[48]Tweet by Gary Sheffield, Twitter, @ProfGSheffield, 4 June 2019, http://twitter.com/ProfGSheffield/status/1135855920221630464.
[49]Badsey, 'A Muddy Vision', p. 46.

growing plethora of channels makes maintaining an audience far more difficult now than it was in the early years of the BBC. Thus, 'as producers chase discerning, discriminating, elusive and fickle audiences with their fingers on the remote control button, remembrance television has had to become more televisual, hybridizing remembrance and entertainment'.[50] In 1924, BBC Director R.F. Palmer highlighted this disparity when responding to suggested programme revisions received from the IWM, as he stated that 'one can hardly expect every member of our immense audience to take sufficient interest in this subject to obtain and read books'.[51] The corporation's foundational triad of 'inform, educate, entertain' is evidently a precarious balancing act.

**Narrative Keystones**

Specific analysis of programmes can shed further light on prominent narrative tropes. Programmes associated with two of the BBC's keystone anniversaries, specifically *The Somme 1916: From Both Sides of the Wire* (BBC2, 2016) for the titular battle and *They Shall Not Grow Old* (BBC2, 2018) for the Armistice, are particularly indicative new narrative content and delivery in centenary programming. While the BBC was only involved in production of the former, their promotion and broadcast of the latter highlights it for consideration. Both series were championed as presenting revolutionary aspects; respectively, a transnational approach to the Somme, and a colourised, veteran-driven account of the war. Yet the use of colourised footage in historical television documentaries was not new, having been an evolving televisual trend for some time.[52] Anglo-German presentations of the battle were not a new development where historiography is considered either. Neither of these aspects were actually revolutionary in the wider context of histories of the war; rather, they were indicative of the disconnect between television and history as practice, and also of a tendency to treat a technique as new when it is applied to different footage.

*The Somme 1916: From Both Sides of the Wire*

This three-part documentary, presented on the battlefields by historian and battlefield archaeologist Peter Barton, had the outlined intention to redress the primarily Anglo-centric focus prevalent in previous histories of the Somme.[53] This was reflected in the naming of the episodes, with the title for each given in English and German. The presentation of this Anglo-German approach as 'pioneering' did not sit well with some historians, with one complainant highlighting that Anglo-German histories of the

[50]Andrews, 'Mediating Remembrance: Personalization and Celebrity in Television's Domestic Remembrance', *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 4, 3 (2011), p. 361.
[51]Imperial War Museum, EN1/1/BRO/001.
[52]Ebbrecht, 'History, Public Memory and Media Event', pp. 225–226.
[53] This point is acknowledged by BBC History commissioning editor Simon Young in *Bringing the Marginal into the Mainstream*.

Somme were not a new development.[54] This was true, yet it is likely this 'unique' aspect was in specific reference to previous television programmes rather than previous histories as a whole. Throughout the series, first-hand accounts from soldiers were read out to give authenticity to the narrative, though this authenticity was impaired by painfully artificial German accents. This jarring element was slightly immersion-breaking, and the decision to not read the accounts in German with subtitles (or to use German voice actors) was baffling given the transnational impetus. The programme's historical consultant suggested the use of German actors, but he was overruled.[55] This is also indicative of a divergence between BBC producers and the historians they employ. Given the efforts for continental unity in the centenary, it is also surprising that a German production company was not involved with the programme. Nevertheless, the episodes do have considerable merits in terms of shifting the common narrative about the Somme. The series also reached a substantial audience, as viewing figures remained around 1.8–1.7 million.[56]

Despite the overwhelming focus on the first day of the battle elsewhere, this series dedicated one episode to it, and endeavoured to explain failed objectives in terms beyond blundering generals. 'First Day — Erster Tag' covered familiar aspects of the battle alongside German perspectives, such as accounts of the physical and psychological impact of the preceding bombardment; the defensive nature of their trench and dugout systems; interception of British phone calls relating to the attack using a Moritz machine, and the gathering of intelligence by Germans from British prisoners of war. None of these were revelations in historiographical terms, but they were counterpoints to the prevailing narrative that the Somme failed purely because it was a bad idea.[57] 'Defence in Depth — Verteidigung in der Tiefe' continued the account of the offensive from the Battle of Bazentin Ridge. There was a detailed consideration of the tactical developments made by the German army during the battle, specifically of a more fluid defensive line by defending from camouflaged shell holes. There was also mention of when the Germans clamped down on British intelligence efforts, arrested 'watchers' behind their own lines and sealed the Dutch

[54]Tweet by Rob Schaefer, Twitter, @GERArmyResearch, 18 July 2016, http://twitter.com/GERArmyResearch/status/755127813750095872, Accessed 18 June 2018.
[55]Tweet by Jeremy Banning, Twitter, @jbanningww1, 1 August 2016, http://twitter.com/jbanningww1/status/760211147320651780, Accessed 18 June 2019.
[56]Weekly Viewing Data, Broadcasters' Audience Research Board, http://www.barb.co.uk/viewing-data/weekly-top-30. Accessed 19 June 2019,
[57]See Christopher Duffy, *Through German Eyes: The British and the Somme 1916,* (London: Phoenix, 2nd edn 2007), pp. 13–19; Robert Kershaw, *24 Hrs at the Somme: 1 July 1916,* (London: WH Allen, 2016), pp. 10–43; Martin Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme: 1 July 1916,* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 61–62.

border, and the differences in interrogation techniques. The episode concluded with the end of the Battle of Ginchy, noting the replacement of General Erich von Falkenhayn with Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and Quartermaster-General Erich Ludendorff. The final episode, 'End Game — End Spiel [*sic*]' discussed the introduction of tanks to the battlefield, the debut of the 'creeping barrage', the difficulties presented by the mud in winter, the differing attitudes towards execution for desertion, and ultimately the German withdrawal to the *Siegfriedstellung* (Hindenburg Line), which Barton argued was where the Battle of the Somme actually ended. In his closing remarks, he noted that some historians have viewed the Somme as a 'bloody but critical testing ground where vital lessons were learned that helped speed the Armistice.' He retorted that while the battle did indeed damage German defences, it did not hasten the end of the war and was ultimately a German defensive victory. Barton also noted that 1917 was the most costly year of the war, in which the campaigns at Arras, Champagne and Passchendaele were a consequence of the lessons the Germans had learned at the Somme and Picardy — the eventual German downfall occurred under very different circumstances.[58] In this manner, the programme directly challenged reductionist narratives which focus on the first day of the battle with little regard for its progression.

The documentary was well-received by media critics. *The Guardian* praised it as a 'clear, authoritative guide to the most costly war in the history of the British army'.[59] *The Telegraph* gave it four stars, and in a familiar cultural pairing of war and football, noted the British experience of the war 'was a tragic tale of tactical naiveté, faulty ammunition and fatally underestimating the enemy. Not unlike the England football team at major tournaments, in fact'.[60] The review also noted the emotional impact of the footage showing grinning soldiers about to face death, an impact mirrored in similar footage used in *They Shall Not Grow Old*. Evidently, the disparity between television and history is not a concern for media reviewers, rather a criticism of the 'historian-cop'[61] seeking to critique programmes on their terms.

[58]'End Game — End Spiel', *The Battle of the Somme 1916: From Both Sides of the Wire*, BBC2 England, 17 August 2016.
[59]'The Somme 1916 Review — a Fresh Take on an All Too Familiar Story', *The Guardian*, 19 July 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/jul/19/the-somme-1916-review, Accessed 20 June 2019.
[60]'The Somme 1916: From Both Sides of the Wire Debunks the Myths of Britain's Bloodiest Battle: Review', *The Telegraph*, 18 July 2016, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/tv/2016/07/18/the-somme-1916-from-both-sides-of-the-wire-debunks-the-myths-of, Accessed 20 June 2019.
[61]Robert Sklar, 'Historical Films: Scofflaws and the Historian-Cop', *Reviews in American History*, 25, 2 (1997), *passim*. See also Badsey, 'A Muddy Vision', p. 48.

*They Shall Not Grow Old*

A key event in the BBC's centenary schedule was the screening of *They Shall Not Grow Old* on the anniversary of the Armistice. The film was directed by Peter Jackson, renowned for having directed, written and produced the film trilogy *Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003). The film takes its title from Laurence Binyon's *For the Fallen* (1914), although the third and fourth words have been switched. This was unlikely to be an error, given the involvement of the IWM and 14–18 NOW. It is possible the language was modernised in a similar vein to the colourisation of the footage, with artistic license taking precedence over poetic nuance. This is not an issue that the BBC was responsible for. The decision to broadcast it for the final anniversary in the centenary schedule means it merits some attention.

The sole use of recorded testimony was clearly an attempt to allow soldiers to speak of their experiences in their own words with a minimal impact of bias. Indeed, Jackson noted that he had not intended to 'impose' anything on the narrative.[62] Aside from the notes in the opening and closing sequences, the film ran contemporary footage and recordings of veterans without any interruption. This was praised by one American reviewer as having left the film 'blessedly free of the sapient sounds of experts and academic historians'.[63] This comment is at odds with the film credits, which thanked the oral historians who captured the voices of the veterans. It also disregards an unavoidable aspect of the historical method — the selection of sources. It would have been impossible to present every piece of footage filmed during the war, and every account recorded since, in the confines of one film. Therefore, a selection process had to occur in which certain sources were used and others were not, thus (albeit indirectly or unconsciously) forming a narrative.

There was further evidence of creative licence. The initial black-and-white footage gradually filled the screen to the whistled tune of *Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire*, yet the song was listed under a different title in the soundtrack, and the end credits rolled to a lyrically-sanitised version of *Mademoiselle from Armentières*..[64] These adjustments did not detract from the film's sense of authenticity though, as they were unlikely to be noticed by a general audience unfamiliar with wartime songs. Certain editing aspects

[62]Blavatnik School of Government, They Shall Not Grow Old: Peter Jackson Q&A, YouTube, 12 February 2019, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFMU_BGkleA, Accessed 21 June 2019.

[63]'A Few Thoughts on the Authenticity of Peter Jackson's "They Shall Not Grow Old"', *New Yorker*, 14 January 2019, http://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/a-few-thoughts-on-the-authenticity-of-peter-jacksons-they-shall-not-grow-old, Accessed 20 June 2019.

[64]It is officially recorded as *If You Want to Find — Official Trench Song* performed by Plan 9 and Hamish McKeich.

could also be interpreted as having affected the narrative. Following the discussion of features of an unnamed battle (which was undeniably the Somme), the footage flashed from footage of smiling young men to photos of corpses evoking a disturbing before-and-after montage. One notably unusual aspect, however, was that the content of the film did not seek to obscure the variety of wartime experience — there were many instances where the soldiers responded to their surroundings with humour, a feature largely devoid from such programming since *Blackadder Goes Forth* (BBC1, 1989).

Again, the film received positive reviews in the media. *The Guardian*'s reviewer gave it five stars, noting that the modernising alterations made it appear 'as though 100 years of film history had been suddenly telescoped into a single moment'.[65] It was also given five stars by *The Independent*, with the tag-line 'No *Lord of the Rings* battle could match the sheer hellishness of what the filmmaker recreates here'.[66] The use of the term 'recreates' is a striking, though possibly unintentional, reflection on the extent to which this is a documentary or a creative work. More noteworthy still is the reference to J.R.R. Tolkien's iconic work — it was argued elsewhere in the BBC's centenary that Tolkien did not believe in the concept of 'a war to end all wars', which resulted in the perpetual conflict in his narratives.[67]

However, while the film let the soldiers tell their own story, the lack of any information about events resulted in a confusing chronology. It was a depiction without context, giving the viewer a sense of the war rather than detailed knowledge about it. An obsession with authenticity appears to have overridden the desire to educate. One of the film's opening statements noted that the war was different from year to year, so the lack of reference to relevant time periods was a puzzling omission. The film did not necessarily require direct narration; in keeping with the period, informational slides could have been used in the style of contemporary films such as *The Battle of the Somme* (1916). Furthermore, despite the good intentions behind the colourisation process, the colour grading itself was not without dispute, as one historian criticised

[65]'They Shall Not Grow Old Review – an Utterly Breathtaking Journey into the Trenches', *The Guardian*, 11 November 2018, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/nov/11/they-shall-not-grow-old-peter-jackson-review-first-world-war-footage, Accessed 20 June 2019.

[66]'They Shall Not Grow Old Review: Peter Jackson's astonishing WW1 documentary is like no other', *The Independent*, 11 November 2018, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/they-shall-not-grow-old-peter-jackson-review-first-world-war-ww1-lord-of-the-rings-hobbit-a8586401.html, Accessed 20 June 2019.

[67]*War of Words: Soldier-Poets of the Somme,* BBC2 England, 15 November 2014. John Garth provides a more in-depth analysis in *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-Earth* (London: HarperCollins, 2003).

'the highly stylised palette of washed out colours [as] used in "Private Ryan"'.[68] The colourised presentation lifted the footage out of its original time for a modern audience, yet consequently removed its historical context. The same American reviewer who praised the lack of expert interjection in the film noted that contemporary audiences would not have bemoaned its lack of colour or sound, and that while we might interpret the men smiling through the screens as broadly good-humoured, it is possible that they were simply amused by the novelty of being filmed, or of being recognised by viewers back home.[69] Once again, the application of modern cultural frameworks to historical events can shape interpretation of them.

One major criticism of the film is the representational lacunae of groups other than white British soldiers. Understandably, there was only so much Jackson could cover within the time constraints of the film. It is also possible this was the result of a lack of variety in the source material available.[70] Particularly apparent is a lack of representation for the experiences and role of women in the war. Jackson explained this was an issue of time, and that had the film been longer, 'the nurses would have been there'.[71] Yet women *are* present in Jackson's film, albeit passively. They were present in the veteran's recollections of visits to brothels, an aspect further amplified by the playing of *Mademoiselle from Armentieres* in the credits. To portray women in this light alone leaves them as 'the butt of men's jokes, rather than flesh-and-blood actors in their own right'.[72] Jackson may have been unable to efficiently convey the breadth of women's roles during the war, but giving some women a voice to demonstrate their own part would have provided some counterbalance. As noted by Susan Grayzel, 'it remains worth asking why the filmmakers chose to have women reduced to their sexual functions as the way to capture the male perspective on them in relationship to this war'.[73] When we consider that this film was one of the major

[68]Tweet by Jonathan Boff, Twitter, @JonathanBoff, 12 November 2018, http://twitter.com/JonathanBoff/status/1061933692636020737, Accessed 18 June 2019.

[69]'A Few Thoughts', *New Yorker*; Roger Smither, '"P'raps I Shall See You…": Recognition of Loved Ones in Non-Fiction Film of the First World War', in Nicholas J. Saunders and Paul Cornish (eds.), *Contested Objects: Material Memories of the Great War,* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 181.

[70]'Colorizing and Fictionalizing the Past: A Review of Peter Jackson's *They Shall Not Grow Old*', *Nursing Clio*, 12 February 2019, http://nursingclio.org/2019/02/12/colorizing-and-fictionalizing-the-past-a-review-of-peter-jacksons-they-shall-not-grow-old/, Accessed 3 December 2020.

[71]Quoted in 'Colorizing and Fictionalizing the Past'.

[72]Ibid.

[73]Susan R. Grayzel, 'Who Gets to Be in the War Story? Absences and Silences in *They Shall Not Grow Old*', *American Historical Review*, 124, 5 (2019), p. 1787.

keystones of the BBC's centenary schedule, and that it was sent to schools across the country, the lack of representation of different groups feels very much like a missed opportunity.

As previously noted, while the battle featured in the middle of the film was never named, the characteristic moments of the Somme were apparent to historians. Yet the chronology of events was muddled: the men spoke of the bombardment; then the tanks advanced (which did not occur until several months into the battle at Flers-Courcelette); followed by the acknowledgement that it had been a beautiful morning; then the explosion of a mine in the wrong place which gave the Germans time to prepare; recollections of walking steadily behind a barrage (the creeping barrage technique was not deployed on the first day of the battle); and discovering that despite the bombardment, the wire remained uncut. There was also the mention of *Flammenwerfer* troops in the German trenches, yet no mention of the debut of the British Livens Large Gallery Flame Projector. Of course, these were ultimately technicalities which would only be picked up by those with previous knowledge of the Somme — as the battle was not named, the audience was not being intentionally misinformed. However, the film did present a narrative which essentially played out thus: war was declared; the troops went to France; the battle of the Somme took place; the Armistice was signed. Ultimately, this reflects an ongoing issue of programmes about the conflict, in which they can appease the public while frustrating historians. The two audiences remain disparate, and without any evidence of change, this is not a feature of media war commemoration which is likely to change.

**Conclusion**

Despite apparent attempts to present the war in new ways and on new platforms, the tone of the centenary programming was often familiar, with piecemeal deviations drowned out by the broader presence of futility narratives. This clash between repetition of old tropes and revisionist interpretations confused the overall tone. While historians were featured on BBC programmes, their restriction to answering questions posed by the presenter and comparatively diminutive involvement in the flagship programmes suggested that opportunities to challenge overriding narratives were missed. There was a clear drive to discuss the war from different angles and perspectives, yet alongside the regular presence of familiar tropes elsewhere, their impact was questionable. It is not transparently clear how the overall narrative connects with Winter and Prost's generational model outlined earlier; there were elements of all three in a bewildering amalgamation. While there was some involvement of military and cultural history, the bulk of the narrative was influenced by the social history reminiscent of 1960s historiography. This indicates that representations of the war on the BBC have struggled to evolve in recent decades.